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Turner on Spying: A Mini-Dose of Carter

Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition
By Stansfield Turner
Houghton Mifflin – $16.95
304 pages
Reviewed by Tom Diaz

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"Secrecy and Democracy," Adm. Stansfield Turner's rather tepid little book about his turn at the helm of the Central Intelligence Agency, doesn't tell the reader much about spies, or the Central Intelligence Agency, or what either does.

But like a passably decent high-school text on basic civics, it may serve a useful purpose by inspiring reflection on the role of the darker arts of government in a democracy that is under unrelenting assault in an undemocratic world.

Adm. Turner's name alone almost certainly guarantees that the book will sell well in the book stalls around the CIA's headquarters at Langley, Va. He is the object of fierce controversy among some who say he single-handedly destroyed the agency's ability to conduct covert operations and gather intelligence through human beings (spies), as opposed to "national technical means" (satellites and such-like).

The CIA wraps itself in so much secrecy, probably properly so, that few outside its walls can pass final judgment on the admiral's plea of "not guilty" on that particular rap.

But no matter, because the book is at heart less a personal memoir than a criticism of bureaucratic ways of doing things and an apology for a particular credo on spying. There are other, conflicting credos, but Adm. Turner fashions his in a reasonably workmanlike way, worthy of considering.

The Turner Credo is fairly simple: More congressional oversight is good for the intelligence business because it keeps it honest; the United States ought to take advantage of its technological skills to gather intelligence and should rely less on human beings to do so. And the boxes and charts that map out the existing welter of civilian and military agencies involved in intelligence functions ought to be knocked into more coordinated shape, with a czar in charge.

Despite the press hype given the book in recent weeks, "Secrecy and Democracy" takes no more than a half-dozen half-hearted swipes at the Reagan administration.

In fact, the few passages that directly assault the Reagan crew read almost as if they were spliced into the text. One can imagine an adviser (perhaps The Washington Post's Bob Woodward, who "was kind enough to read several drafts and to provide advice on the art of writing books") pulling Adm. Turner aside after having read a first draft and telling him in a polite way, "This is deadly dull stuff, Stan, and unless you throw in a punch or two, you got a loser on your hands."

The closest the book gets to red meat is a non-partisan section in which the admiral settles a few old scores with the Defense Intelligence Agency. Adm. Turner shreds what he describes as a mundane staff of castoffs and aging bureaucrats, accusing them of cranking out unimaginative analyses, caving in to the policy wishes of higher-ranking brass and thinking defensively instead of creatively.

Only those who've made their careers in the closed, byzantine world of the intelligence business know for sure whether the DIA is a pathetically laughable bureaucratic boneyard, and whether the National Security Agency (another box on the complex intelligence chart) is an arrogant runaway, as Adm. Turner charges.

But even the average reader whose only security clearance is permission from his wife for a night out on the town once a month can ponder the admiral's ruminations on how the good guys (us) can stay that way and still play intelligence hardball with the bad guys (the Soviets).

To put Adm. Turner's credo into perspective, one should recall the peculiar time and circumstances under which he was called to a duty he says he didn't want.

Although it is a fact now obscured by the fog of political war, the Jimmy Carter presidency, during which Adm. Turner served as director of Central Intelligence, was in one narrow way the natural evolutionary forerunner of the Reagan administration. Before other Democrats caught the scent, Mr. Carter grasped that the country had reached its limit with the federal bureaucracy.

But, although Mr. Carter excelled at describing the bloated bureaucracy as a symptom, he never grasped the problem of political philosophy that underlay the symptom.

Instead, he brought to the White House a kind of tinkerer's fascination with blueprints and gearboxes. He was fixated on "drastically reorganizing the government," as if shifting herds of bureaucrats from one box in an organization chart to another would right a ship of state that was foundering because it was overloaded.

The effort became the sickeningly sweet and singularly irritating blend one thinks of as vintage Jimmy Carter — good intentions, attention to fine detail, maddening self-righteousness, and babes-in-the-woods innocence.

One of the wizards Mr. Carter called in to shift the boxes about was Adm. Turner, whom he plucked from obscurity as commander of NATO's southern flank and appointed director of Central Intelligence, a post that included command over the Central Intelligence Agency and, theoretically at least, direction of the efforts of other arms of the multilimbed "intelligence community."

Stansfield Turner

Seen in that context, "Secrecy and Democracy" is clearly a miniaturization of the Carter formula: a dose of arguably good ideas, a sheaf of blueprints to move gearboxes and drive shafts about, all smeared over with a cloying paste of self-righteousness and a kind of wide-eyed innocence. (The innocence, one suspects, is more professed than real in the case of an old salt like Adm. Turner, a man whose career demonstrably was seasoned in hardball Pentagon politics.)

For all of that, the book is a useful articulation of one man's view of the answers to the host of important questions that have been raised in the last decade about reconciling democratic institutions with the undeniable needs of secrecy that the business of intelligence demands.

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